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Stimulating Tourists' Imagination: The Role of Visual Communication in Managing Storynomic Tourism Strategies in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This research aims to analyse the role of visual communication in supporting storynomic tourism strategies, particularly how visual elements shape tourist perceptions, emotional connections, and destination attractiveness in the digital age.

Materials and methods: A qualitative-descriptive approach was employed, incorporating visual semiotics and representation discourse analysis. Data were collected through digital documentation of social media content, in-depth interviews with tourism content creators and digital travellers, and participatory online observation. Visual materials from Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube accounts (e.g., @wonderfulindonesia) were the primary objects of study.

Results: Findings reveal that visuals—through the use of local symbols, colour palettes, illustration styles, and cinematic storytelling—effectively build emotional narratives and trigger the imagination of digital travellers. Content infused with cultural meaning outperformed purely informational visuals in engagement metrics. Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok proved particularly powerful in conveying micro-narratives that inspire travel interest.

Conclusions: Visual storytelling is a critical component of storynomic tourism, influencing traveller decisions through emotional engagement and digital immersion. A research-based visual communication strategy that prioritises cultural authenticity and emotional resonance is essential for tourism stakeholders aiming to differentiate destinations in the competitive digital landscape.

Keywords

visual communication, storynomic tourism, digital marketing, destination branding, visual storytelling, tourism strategy, social media.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, digital transformation has revolutionised various sectors, including the tourism industry. The development of information and communication technology, especially through social media, has changed the way tourists seek information, build expectations, and decide on tourist destinations. Information about a place is no longer consumed through brochures or conventional advertisements, but through digital visual content spread across various platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and tourism online portals. In this context, tourism narratives have evolved from simply conveying factual data to emotional, visual, and interactive forms of communication (Chakravarty et al., 2021).

This emotional narrative emerges in response to the needs of travellers who want a more authentic and meaningful experience. Modern travellers, especially millennials and Gen Z, are not only looking for visually beautiful destinations, but also want the story behind the place be it local culture, history, mythology, or social experiences. Therefore, the storynomic tourism approach becomes very relevant in this context. This concept combines the power of story with economic value, creating a destination narrative that is not only informative, but also builds an emotional connection with the audience (Kartajaya et al., 2021).

Storynomic tourism refers to a tourism destination marketing and development strategy that utilises narrative as the main element to create added value. Stories become a medium to embed destination images in the minds of tourists and arouse their curiosity and emotional engagement. More than that, stories also create a sense of place, which is a deep connection between people and the space they live in or visit (Jo et al., 2022). In other words, a tourist destination that has a strong story will be more easily remembered and lived by visitors than a destination that only displays visual beauty without a strong narrative.

This is where visual communication plays a very important role. In the digital context, stories are not only told verbally or textually, but mainly through visual media. Photos, illustrations, colours, symbols, and short videos are the main tools to convey narrative messages. Visual communication not only conveys information, but also holds meanings, emotions, and local cultural values that are difficult to explain verbally. Well-designed visuals can create a narrative experience that touches and imprints the audience's memory (Kim & Youn 2016).

According to research by Roth (2020), story visualisation has the power to build imagined geographies, which are

imaginative representations of a place formed through visual experiences. When tourists see a cinematic video about the beauty of local culture in Bali or an ethnic-style illustration that tells the legend of Mount Bromo, they do not only see images, but also imagine the stories and experiences they might have there. It is this imagination that then becomes a strong driver in tourism decisions.

Technically, visual communication in the context of storynomic tourism comes in many forms: graphic design that emphasizes local symbols, colour palettes that evoke a certain emotional atmosphere, typography that reflects the character of the destination, and audiovisual narratives that are packaged cinematically. Content such as "Visit Labuan Bajo" or "Wonderful Indonesia", for example, uses visual elements to convey not only natural beauty, but also narratives of local people's lives, traditional wisdom, and the spiritual meaning of a place [Tang et al. \(2021\)](#). In this process, visuals act as a bridge between the story and the audience's perception. Unfortunately, although this approach has been widely adopted in tourism promotion practices, there are still few studies that specifically examine the role of visual communication in storynomic tourism strategies, especially in the Indonesian context. Most studies still focus on the effectiveness of social media in marketing destinations in general, without examining how visual elements such as symbols, colours, or design styles can shape tourists' emotional perceptions and imagination of destinations [Shaheer et al. \(2021\)](#). Furthermore, research from [Munar and Jacobsen \(2021\)](#) shows that a strong visual experience can significantly increase audience engagement. Visual content that touches the affective side of users is not only viewed, but also shared, commented on, and even used as inspiration in creating similar content (user-generated content). In the context of storynomic tourism, this means that visuals that successfully evoke emotions will extend the life of destination narratives in the digital space through the active participation of travellers. This creates a viral effect that not only increases visibility, but also strengthens the perception and value of the destination.

In addition, the characteristics of today's digital travellers also demand content that is personalised, authentic and able to build emotional connections. They believe more in stories told by fellow users or communities, rather than formal narratives delivered by institutions. Therefore, visuals that are packaged in the form of personal stories such as travel vlogs, narrative-themed Instagram carousels, or illustration-based visual storytelling tend to be more effective in creating connections with audiences ([Cheng et al., 2020](#)).

Visual communication in this context also has a deep semiotic dimension. According to [Kim & Youn \(2016\)](#), visuals hold double meanings: denotative meanings that are immediately visible, and connotative meanings that shape deeper perceptions. In tourism campaigns, symbols such as batik, carvings, masks, or even dance moves, have the power to convey cultural values without having to be explained textually. When these symbols are used in strong visuals, they not only represent the destination, but also form a collective identity that can be felt by both local communities and tourists.

Given these phenomena, it is important to examine how visual communication in storynomic tourism is designed and understood by audiences. What are the visual elements that are effective in conveying destination stories? How do visuals build emotions and form a sense of place? To what extent can the power of visuals influence travellers' imagination and decisions?

This research is crucial not only to strengthen the theoretical foundation in visual communication and tourism studies, but also to provide practical references for tourism industry players and visual content creators in designing more impactful promotional strategies. Especially in the post-pandemic era, when tourists are more selective in choosing destinations and value more personally meaningful experiences.

With this background in mind, this research proposes an analytical approach to visual communication in the storynomic tourism strategy, especially in digital content targeting domestic and international tourists. The main focus of the research is on how visual elements including colours, symbols, illustrations, composition, and visual narratives shape tourists' perceptions, emotions, and imagination of a destination. Through this approach, it is hoped that a new understanding of the relationship between visuals, narrative, and destination attractiveness will emerge in the context of story-based tourism promotion.

Visual communication is the process of conveying messages through visual elements such as images, colours, symbols, shapes, typography, and layout. In the context of tourism narratives, visual communication has an important role in shaping the audience's perceptions and emotions towards a destination. [Wang & Wei \(2022\)](#) introduced the visual semiotics approach, where visuals are understood not only in terms of physical form (denotation), but also the cultural and ideological meanings contained therein (connotation and myth). In tourism promotion, visual symbols such as batik, temple gates, or the tropical blue sea not only represent objects, but also conjure up certain social and cultural meanings in the minds of the audience.

[Wen et al. \(2023\)](#) underlines the importance of visual context in modern mass communication, including in digital campaigns. He states that "images are not just viewed, but actively interpreted by audiences based on their cultural and social backgrounds." Meanwhile, [Kim & Youn \(2016\)](#), in her book *Visual Methodologies*, presents methodological approaches in visual analysis, including analyses of representation, technological modalities, and the relationship of visual narratives to social structures.

In the context of tourism promotion, these approaches help understand how visual content not only conveys messages, but shapes discourses about place, local identity, and destination exoticism. Thus, visual communication theory becomes the foundation of in examining how storynomic tourism narratives are visually constructed in digital space.

Storynomic tourism is a tourism marketing approach that places the story (narrative) as the core of the destination development strategy. This concept was first introduced by Hermawan [Kartajaya et al. \(2021\)](#), who saw that modern travellers seek meaning, not just sights. In this context, stories are used to build emotional appeal, strengthen place identity, and create long-term attachment to the destination.

[Júnior et al., \(2022\)](#) also emphasise the importance of storytelling in destination marketing as a form of emotional branding. When stories are told effectively, they are able to build a sense of place that is not only geographically attached, but also symbolic and psychological. The narrative can be in the form of local legends, stories of indigenous people, history of struggle, or even personal experiences of tourists. In the storynomic tourism approach, visuals become the main channel in conveying stories. Therefore, the role of visual communication is not only as a complement, but as a key element in building an authentic and competitive destination narrative and identity.

Visual storytelling is a technique of conveying messages through a series of images or visual elements that form a storyline. In destination branding, this technique is used to build a consistent and interesting destination narrative. Govers and Go (2009) in Place Branding stated that visual storytelling is effective in creating a positive perception and differentiation of a place's identity in the global market. Li et al. (2023) added that visuals have a performative function, which not only showcases the destination, but also produces experience and imagination. They explain that the tourist experience is increasingly dependent on visual representations that are consumed before the journey begins. Travellers form expectations, emotions and desires based on visual narratives presented in digital campaigns. This reinforces that visual storytelling not only serves as a promotion, but also as a traveller's initial experience of the destination. Graphic design, videos, illustrations, and cultural symbols included in the visual story play a role in building the destination's brand personality.

Tourist behaviour in the digital era is strongly influenced by visual perception, emotional affection, and intense digital engagement. Munar and Jacobsen (2014) argued that the perception process in the context of digital tourism involves visual interpretation combined with emotions and personal values. Travellers today not only observe, but also engage, participate, and even create their own narratives about a place through the digital content they consume and produce. Affection, or emotional response, becomes a key factor in forming connections between travellers and destinations. When visuals are able to evoke emotions of awe, longing, nostalgia, it triggers the decision to visit. Digital engagement, such as sharing photos, leaving comments, or creating travel vlogs, strengthens travellers' attachment to the stories and places they experience visually. In this research, an understanding of perception, affection, and engagement will be the foundation in assessing how visual storynomic tourism is able to shape travellers' consumer journey from the pre-travel to post-travel stage.

Social media has become the main space for visual storytelling practices in tourism. Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube offer highly visual and interactive content formats, allowing destination brands to tell stories in an engaging narrative style. Each platform has unique visual characteristics. Instagram emphasises photographic aesthetics and narrative carousels, TikTok promotes short videos based on cultural trends, while YouTube lends itself to longer, more cinematic visual narratives. According to recent research by Jo et al., (2022), the success of destination promotion on social media largely depends on the visual content's ability to trigger emotions and build engagement. He emphasised that stories told through strong, cinematic and relatable visual elements will be much more effective than hard-selling content. Meanwhile, a study by Shaheer et al. (2021) showed that visual strategies on Instagram by Indonesian tourism brands such as "Wonderful Indonesia" have successfully increased engagement rates and perceptions of destination authenticity through visual-based storytelling.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This research uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with a focus on visual analysis and communication narratives in the context of storynomic tourism. This approach was chosen because the research does not only want to know "what" is displayed in visual communication, but also "how" and "why" these visual elements are able to shape the imagination and attachment of tourists to the destination (Creswell, 2021). This research is exploratory in nature to explore the practice of visual storytelling on the social media of tourist destinations that adopt the storynomic tourism strategy, as well as interpretative in analysing the symbolic meaning of the visual elements used. The research object is focused on visual content produced by official social media accounts of tourist destinations that actively utilise the storynomic tourism approach in Indonesia. One of the main objects in this study is the visual campaign of the @wonderfulindonesia account (Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy), as well as supporting accounts such as @pesona.indonesia and the Wonderful Indonesia YouTube platform.

Test and Measurement Procedures

Digital Documentation Study: The main data was taken from visual documentation in the form of images, infographics, short videos, reels, and digital posters uploaded on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. The data collection period focused on the range of 2022-2025, to capture the latest visual storytelling practices.

In-depth Interviews: Interviews were conducted purposively with: 1) 2 graphic designers of tourism digital content; 2) 2 social media managers from destination promotion agencies; 3) 3 active digital travellers (travel enthusiasts) who frequently interact and re-share storynomic tourism content. Interview questions focused on visual perception, emotional appeal of the content, and reasons for engagement with the stories displayed.

Online Participatory Observation: We also conducted participatory observation through comments, likes, shares, and reposts on several storynomic tourism posts to capture the dynamics of digital user interactions and responses to visual elements.

Data Analysis Technique

The analysis was conducted using two approaches: a) Visual Semiotics Analysis (Barthes, 1977): Used to identify denotative and connotative meanings in each visual element (colours, symbols, illustration style, typography, composition). This approach allows the reading of visual narratives not only from the aesthetic side, but also the ideological and cultural dimensions carried. b) Representation and Discourse Analysis Kim & Youn (2016): To see how destination identities are shaped and constructed through social media. Focus on how visuals build a "sense of place", collective memory, and emotions in the minds of the audience. Analysing process through stages: 1) Open coding to identify key visual elements; 2) Axial coding to categorise visual themes (e.g. heritage, adventure, spiritual, culinary). 3) Theorisation based on dominant narratives that appear in various visual contents; 4) Interpretation of visual meanings and effects on digital tourist behaviour.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Visuals as a Trigger for Digital Travellers' Imagination

Digital transformation has shifted tourism narratives from informative to emotional and narrative-visual approaches. Based on observations of the Instagram accounts @wonderfulindonesia and @pesona.indonesia, it was found that visual content not only displays natural beauty descriptively, but is also constructed to build "stories" that touch the emotional side of the audience. For example, in the "#DiIndonesiaAja" visual campaign, beach visuals are not only accompanied by geographical information, but also narratives that highlight family warmth, childhood nostalgia and inner calm. The visuals are dominated by warm colours (orange and soft brown) and cinematic photography style with shooting angles that emphasise personal experience. This is in line with the findings of Mallick, (2023) that visual communication that inserts cultural context and emotions is proven to be more effective in attracting digital audience engagement than destination promotion that is merely informative.

Visual Narrative Structure: Symbols, Colours, and Illustrative Style:

Semiotic analysis reveals that visual communication in storynomic tourism uses a certain narrative structure: 1) Local cultural symbols (such as batik, traditional musical instruments, and carving motifs) appear as identity markers; 2) Typical colours such as tropical green, ocean blue and brick red are processed to create specific emotional nuances (peaceful, adventurous, warm); 3) Contemporary illustration styles (flat illustration and motion graphics) are used to match the aesthetics of the digital-native audience. Barthes (1977) calls this "relay meaning", where visual signs do not stand alone but work in a network of mutually reinforcing symbols. In other words, visual stories not only convey information, but also build imagination and deep personal impressions Kim & Youn (2016).

Emotional Engagement: Visuals as Sense of Place Activators

From in-depth interviews with three active digital travellers, it was found that the reason why they are interested in exploring a particular destination is not simply because of the "visual beauty", but because of the emotional story that is felt from the content. For example, one informant mentioned that the Dieng Culture Festival promotional video made him feel "homesick", even though he had never been there. This proves that visuals can create a sense of place even before someone physically visits (Govers & Go, 2009). This effect is reinforced by the use of narrative background sound, motion typography, and human-centred footage that creates a personalised and inclusive atmosphere. This strategy is proven to increase emotional engagement as stated by Pocztka, J. and Rozmiarek, M. (2021) who stated that "contemporary tourism is about the experience before the experience".

Social Media as a Visual Storynomic Platform

Instagram and TikTok are the main channels for storynomic tourism because both rely on the power of visuals as the main language. Based on a study by Sudarmanto (2023), Instagram is able to create aspirational desire in users to "emulate" the lifestyle or visual stories displayed.

Short 15-60 second videos on TikTok, for example, allow for an efficient yet emotionally powerful micro-narrative format. This is in line with the concept of narrative transportation theory, where the audience feels "transported" into the digital story being presented (Green & Brock, 2020).

For example, the "#ExploreBelitung" campaign presents digital illustrations featuring a cartoon-style map, a child's voice narration, and illustrations of local figures such as fishermen and dancers. These narratives not only showcase the place, but tell a story of local values and wisdom, strengthening the place branding dimension (Kartajaya, 2021).

Impact of Visual Storytelling on Image and Tourist Interest

Through user interaction, it was found that visually strong storynomic tourism content received higher engagement rates (likes, comments, and shares) than informative content. According to @wonderfulindonesia analytics data in June 2024 (collected from CrowdTangle), content with visual narratives of local culture had an average engagement rate of 4.3%, higher than geographic information-based content (2.1%). This result supports the argument of Kotler et al. (2021) that the 21st century tourism destination economy is not just about selling locations, but about selling meaning and stories.

Visual Title & Platform	Visual Symbol	Dominant Colour	Connotative Meaning	Visual Style	Effect on Travellers
Instagram Reels "The Story Behind Toraja Coffee" (@wonderfulindonesia)	Coffee cup, Tongkonan house, coffee leaves	Warm brown, green	Warmth, nature, authentic, living tradition	Cinematic naturalist	Evokes a sense of authenticity and makes the audience imagine the atmosphere of Toraja
Infographic "Majapahit Kingdom Story Route" (@pesona.indonesia)	Crown, map, arrow, relief	Maroon, gold, black.	Historical glory, pride, cultural adventure	Illustrative infographic	Triggers historical imagination and curiosity towards.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that digital transformation has significantly changed the landscape of tourism communication, from mere information delivery to emotional, imaginative and participatory visual narratives. In the context of storynomic tourism, the role of visual communication becomes very strategic because it is able to activate a sense of place, build a destination image, and arouse the desire of digital tourists even before a physical visit occurs. Effective visuals are not just "aesthetically appealing", but contain layers of meaning through the use of symbols, colours, illustrations, and audio-visual narratives constructed to convey local values, culture, and stories. Visual communication on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok has been proven to create high emotional engagement, shape positive perceptions of destinations, and drive tourist interest. By adopting the visual semiotics approach (Barthes, Rose) and the principles of tourism economic narrative (Kartajaya & Kotler, 2021), this research concludes that

the power of visual storytelling in the storynomic tourism strategy is one of the key factors in creating destination differentiation in the competitive digital era. It is important for DMOs (Destination Management Organisations) and creative economy players to develop a planned and research-based visual communication strategy. The use of visuals rich in local cultural symbols, emotional narratives, and illustrative styles that suit the digital target audience can strengthen destination identity and encourage traveller engagement in the digital space.

Tourism content designers should not only rely on visual beauty, but also integrate visual storytelling that can build the meaning and value of the destination. Experimentation with various visual formats of illustrations, motion graphics, cinematic reels can increase the resonance of stories with target audiences, especially Gen Z and millennials. There needs to be synergy between tourism promotion strategies and local culture-based creative economy development policies. Local governments can encourage cultural narrative-based visual communication training for MSME players, creative communities, and tourism public relations, so as to create a more inclusive and sustainable storynomic tourism ecosystem

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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